

Thai woman faces sedition trial for posing with plastic bowl

A Thai woman has been charged with sedition, police said on Tuesday, March 29th, after photos were spread of her holding a red bowl allegedly bearing a message from an ex-premier who lies at the heart of the kingdom's bitter politics.

The images showed Theerawan Charoensuk, 54, holding a hand-sized bowl with a goodwill note apparently signed by former Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra, whose powerful political dynasty is locked in a decade-long struggle with the kingdom's military-backed royalist elite.

She faces up to seven years in jail if convicted.

Her arrest comes as the ruling junta, who toppled a government led by Thaksin's sister in 2014, hardens its clampdown on political expression ahead of a referendum on a controversial charter it has penned.

The small bowl is used to pour water during Buddhist ceremonies and was distributed at a temple fair in northern Chiang Mai, the Shinawatra's hometown.

It was painted red – a colour with strong associations to the family's supporters, who are known as the "Red Shirts".

Local media reported it was signed by Thaksin along with a slogan that read: "The situation may be hot, but brothers and sisters may gain coolness from the water inside this bucket."

Police declined to comment on the details of the bowl, saying only that they believed it was handed out by a "certain political party".

"She was charged with section 116 – inciting chaos in the country," said Nateephat Akarapongthiti from Chiang Mai's Mae Ping police station.

The junta has outlawed all political activities and protests

"It might be a national security threat."

since the coup, in a vow to bridge the kingdom's vast divides.

But critics say the generals are more focused on rooting out the influence of the Shinawatras, who have dominated electoral politics for the past 10 years and are seen as a threat to the elite's status quo.

Junta chief Prayut Chan-O-Cha told reporters on Tuesday he found the charge was "suitable" because "it might be a national security threat".

"It was [a show of] support for people who have violated laws and run away from criminal charge," he said, a reference to Thaksin, who lives in self-imposed exile to avoid a corruption conviction.

Police said Theerawan, a Chiang Mai resident, was released from custody on Tuesday and will now face trial in a military court.

"She said she held up the bowl, but she didn't think that was

wrong," Nateephat told AFP.

Rights groups say the junta has increasingly leaned on the country's tough sedition law to silence critics.

The charges have been brought against dozens since the 2014 takeover, including peaceful anti-junta activists and pro-democracy students as well as those accused of spreading rumours about alleged military corruption on Facebook.

The military has also overseen a surge in prosecutions for royal defamation, an offence that carries up to 15 years for each charge. © 2016 AFP

US honours 'International Women of Courage'

The United States issued awards on March 29th to 14 lawyers, activists, humanitarians and reformers said to represent "International Women of Courage."

"Fourteen leaders, fourteen role models, fourteen women of courage, one crystal clear message," said Secretary of State John Kerry.

"Don't accept the unacceptable or wait for someone else to step up. Act in the name of justice. Act in the name of tolerance. Act on behalf of truth."

All but one of the honourees were able to attend the ceremony in Washington, an annual event that began in 2007 to encourage women's empowerment.

Bangladeshi barrister Sara Hossain helped draft her country's laws on violence against women and has argued landmark rights cases before the supreme court.

Debra Baptist-Estrada is commander of the immigration department at Belize's main airport and has worked with US officials against corruption and trafficking.

Ni Yulan, a disabled Chinese property rights lawyer, was the only honouree not to receive her award in person, having been forbidden from traveling by her government.

France's Latifa Ibn Ziaten became an activist promoting interfaith dialogue in 2012 after her soldier son was slain by Islamist extremist Mohamed Merah.

Attorney General Thelma Aldana of Guatemala began her career as a courtroom janitor and has now brought corruption charges against the highest in the land.

Naghm Nawzat Hasan is an Iraqi gynaecologist and a member of the country's persecuted Yazidi minority. She works with girls kidnapped and raped by Islamist militants.

Mauritania's first female attorney Fatimata M'baye was honoured as co-founder and president of the Mauritanian Association for Human Rights and fights slavery.

Russian journalist Zhanna Nemtsova has braved death



US Secretary of State John Kerry poses with honourees for a group photo during a ceremony to present the 2016 Secretary of State's International Women of Courage Award at the State Department on Tuesday, March 29th, in Washington, DC. Established in 2007, the award honours women around the world for leadership and courage in equality, social progress, and human rights

threats to campaign for justice for her father, former deputy prime minister Boris Nemtsov, assassinated last year.

Zuzana Stevulova, director of the Human Rights League of Slovakia, is the foremost champion of the rights of refugees flowing into Europe from war in the Middle East.

Awadeya Mahmoud, founder of the Women's Food and Tea Sellers' Cooperative in Sudan has championed the rights of small businesswomen against authoritarian government.

Former BBC journalist Vicky Ntetema exposed the trade in the body parts of murdered albinos used in ritual magic and

now leads an NGO dedicated to ending it.

Thai bookseller Rodjaraeg Wattapanit has twice been sent to re-education camps by her country's military junta but still provides a space for political free expression.

Nihal Naj Ali Al-Awlaqi, Yemen's minister of legal affairs,

helped put women's rights in a draft constitution and is involved in talks to end her country's civil war.

Next month, the honourees will tour US cities to meet American people and discuss their work to improve the lives of women and girls around the world. © 2016 AFP

Georgian billionaire ex-PM stirs ire for shifting giant tree by ship

Georgia's eccentric billionaire, former premier Bidzina Ivanishvili, has come under fire from environmentalists for uprooting a rare giant tree and transporting it by boat to his private park.

The startling transplant was the latest eye-catching extravagance from the tycoon, who has repeatedly wowed his tiny homeland by amassing a priceless art collection, building a futuristic palace overlooking the capital, and establishing his own private zoo.

Surreal video footage of the 650-tonne tulip tree sailing upright 40 kilometres along the Black Sea coast went viral on social media in the ex-Soviet country, ahead of it being replanted on Ivanishvili's estate on March 28th.

Local residents have staged protests in Tsikhisdziri village in western Georgia where the tree was uprooted last week.

Environmentalists accused Ivanishvili of causing serious damage to the ecosystem during the tree's removal and expressed fears that it was doomed to wither after replanting.

"There are only a few dozen tulip trees in Georgia and this majestic 135-year-old specimen has zero chances of surviving replanting," activist Nata Peradze from Guerrilla Gardeners environmentalist group told AFP.

"Most importantly, excavation works have seriously damaged unique flora in the tree's original location," she said.

Ivanishvili has defended his project, saying he "purchased the tree legally".

"Giant trees are my hobby. I am developing a park where I think it is appropriate," he said in televised remarks.

The reclusive, yoga-loving billionaire rose from dire poverty to the pinnacle of power in the tiny Caucasus nation.

Few people even knew what he looked like until he burst onto Georgia's political scene in 2011 and the next year ousted from power the seemingly unbeatable then-ruling party of his nemesis, pro-Western ex-president Mikheil Saakashvili.

He resigned as prime minister in 2013 and retreated to his mansion overlooking the capital Tbilisi, which houses an aquarium teeming with sharks.

But he is still widely believed to call the shots in Georgian politics. At one of his other villas on Georgia's Black Sea coast Ivanishvili keeps a private collection of exotic animals, including zebras, kangaroos, and penguins. © 2016 AFP



Georgia's former Prime Minister Bidzina Ivanishvili

UK bank foreign currency transfer fees still highest despite cuts

JANE GRAY

UK banks have cut charges on small foreign currency transfers over the past three months by almost 22 per cent, most likely owing to increasing market competition, according to recent market data.

The drop in bank charges benefits those making regular international transfers, such as sending money to a relative abroad or paying for services on an overseas property.

The figures from the International Money Transfer Index (IMTI) show that even with the drop in charges, banks are still charging three times more than specialist currency brokers. For example, for £1,000 transactions UK banks charge 4.8 per cent (down from 6.1 per cent three months ago) while specialist firms charge 1.6 per cent.

The IMTI is put together by intelligence and comparison service FXcompared and incorporates international money transfer data from all major banks in the UK, US, Canada, and Australia. This monthly data is then compared to the cost of using a non-bank provider.

Daniel Webber, co-founder of FXcompared, said: "It is likely the reason we have seen such a sharp drop in the amounts banks are charging is down to competition from currency brokers."

"There is still a very big difference between what you pay to a bank for moving money overseas compared to what you would pay a broker," he said.

Globally, the IMTI has shown that UK customers save more on international money transfers compared to the US and Australia, with Australia being the most expensive.

World's nations gather to rescue ocean life

CONTINUED FROM FRONT blocs on how best to manage the high seas.

One is the scope of zones in which industrial fishing and mineral extraction would be curtailed or banned.

"Marine protected areas are one of the strongest tools for safeguarding nature and rebuilding fish stocks," said Roberts.

Currently, just over 3 per cent of oceans – all within national boundaries – are off limits to commercial exploitation. The UN Convention on Biodiversity has called for a target of 10 per cent by 2020.

But many experts cite the World Parks Congress 2014 recommendation that fully 30 per cent

of oceans should be set aside as de facto international parks.

Even then, according to a study published last week in the journal Conservation Letters, it may not be enough. The loss of marine life is already so advanced that it would take larger areas to protect biodiversity and prevent some fish stocks from collapsing.

Nations also disagree on what rules to set for exploiting marine genetic resources.

"Right now, there are no rules – it's 'first come, first serve,'" said Julien Rochette, a researcher at the Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations in Paris.

Only three countries – the United

States, Germany, and Japan – hold 70 per cent of patents stemming from marine life, he noted.

Opposed to a "freedom on the high seas" approach on this issue is the principle – upheld by China and the G77 bloc of developing nations – that such genetic wealth belongs to the "common heritage of mankind", and should thus be shared out.

How to set up environmental impact assessments, enforcement, and technology transfer will also be on the table in New York.

"This is the last major multilateral negotiation for the environment on the UN agenda," Rochette said. © 2016 AFP

Worst bleaching on record for Great Barrier Reef: scientists

Aerial surveys of Australia's Great Barrier Reef have revealed the worst bleaching on record in the icon's pristine north, scientists said on Tuesday, March 29th, with few corals escaping damage.

Researchers said the view was devastating after surveying some 520 reefs via plane and helicopter between Cairns and the Torres Strait in the north of Queensland state.

"This will change the Great Barrier Reef forever," Terry Hughes, an expert on coral reefs from James Cook University, told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Just over a week ago, the Australian government revealed bleach-

ing at the World Heritage-listed site was "severe" but noted that the southern area had escaped the worst.

Bleaching occurs when abnormal environmental conditions, such as warmer sea temperatures, cause corals to expel tiny photosynthetic algae, draining them of their colour.

Hughes, convener of Australia's National Coral Bleaching Taskforce, said in the far north – the most remote and pristine areas – almost without exception, every reef showed consistently high levels of bleaching. © 2016 AFP